

W. Corbett
from his old friend
The Author -
REMINISCENCES

C. Millicent Corbett Winder
OF
Jesse Will -

SCHOOL AND ARMY LIFE,

1839 TO 1859.

The following Reminiscences were originally intended solely for the amusement of the writer's Nephews and Nieces. They are now printed for the use of such of his friends as may care to read them.

April, 1875.

CHAPTER VIII.

WE had fully expected to remain at Meerut the usual term of three years; and were therefore much astonished, when on the 6th of January, 1856, we received the route for Lucknow, at which place we were ordered to join the field force then collecting for the annexation of Oude.

This large country was the only province in the North-west still under native rule. From it the greater number of our best sepoys were obtained; and they generally returned and lived on their pensions there, when their term of service was at an end.

Sir James Outram was the British Resident at Lucknow, and had under his command three regiments of native infantry; but Oude, Lucknow included, was entirely under the rule of the king, who, with his favourites and courtiers, passed his time in writing poetry, fiddling, and debauchery. Everything went by favour, and nothing could be obtained without heavy bribes.

In consequence, the whole country was in a state of anarchy; murder and robbery were every-day occurrences. The villages were all fortified; and

each petty chieftain had his armed retainers, whose numbers were regulated by the state of his finances, which again depended on the success or otherwise of the forays which he made on his neighbours.

When the king was in want of money, which was continually happening, he sent out a force from Lucknow to collect his taxes; that is to say, to rob every one who was too weak to resist. This party seldom got very far before they were met by a much superior one, hastily collected by the chiefs in the immediate neighbourhood; who were only too ready to lay aside their private feuds, and band together to resist the tax-gatherer. A fight, more or less serious, then took place, when more chiefs continually arriving to reinforce their brethren, the king's troops returned to Lucknow, leaving their wounded to be dispatched in the usual Asiatic manner, by decapitation or crimping; and carrying back with them whatever treasure they had been able to lay hands on. "Budmashes," or bad characters, on our side of the water, who were "wanted" by the authorities, had only to cross the river to find themselves in safety, and were joyfully received as recruits by the bands of robbers which overran the country.

Such was the state of affairs in Oude in 1855; when, finding that the king and his ministers paid no attention to advice or remonstrance, Lord Dalhousie determined to depose him, and to annex the country.

A force of some 10,000 men was ordered to assemble at Cawnpore, about three miles from the frontier, and about fifty from Lucknow. With the exception of some artillery and ourselves it was composed of natives, who at that time were supposed to

cricket and rackets. On the river we found two pretty good four-oared boats, in which some of us, with the chaplain, Mr. Polehampton, an old Etonian, used to row. There were plenty of good fellows among the regiments at the station, which was about three miles off; and there was also a very fair cricket ground there, on which we played several matches every week during the cold weather.

Our mess-house was a fine building, standing about half a mile from the king's stables; and as there were several good rooms in it, which were not required for the purposes of the mess, some half a dozen of the officers occupied them; the rest having quarters allotted them in a large palace, called, I think, the Fureed-Bukoh, on the bank of the Goomtic. This palace was surrounded by houses occupied by rich natives, the female portion of whose establishments were in the habit of frequenting the flat roofs of the houses when the sun was down, and it was nearly dark; the air then being cooler, and the high surrounding walls preventing their seeing or being seen by the passers by outside. From the windows of the lofty palace, however, their movements were perfectly visible; and it was soon evident that they did not take offence at their young neighbours watching them; for they returned their salutes and beckoned to them. After this telegraphing had gone on for some time, two subalterns agreed that they would try to pay their fair friends a visit. It was a very rash undertaking; for though there was a continuous line of communication, it lay along the top of very high walls, and over the top of a narrow and still higher gateway; and of course, if they had

been discovered and caught in the attempt, their lives would have been taken at once. However, I suppose this formed no part of their plans, and most probably never entered their heads. They made their way in safety on to the flat roof, and waited for the ladies; but the first who made her appearance took them for robbers and shrieked; on which the whole place was quickly filled with armed men, carrying torches. Considering the distance, and the bad places which they had to cross in their hasty retreat, it was wonderful that they managed to escape; which they did; and so effectually outran their pursuers, that the latter never even found out that they were the sahibs from the neighbouring palace, who they thought could not have climbed over walls so expeditiously. It was just as well that the affair terminated as it did; for had they been well received on their first visit they would, of course, have returned frequently, and some fine night a trap would have been laid for them, into which they would have fallen, and been heard of no more.

When first quartered in the town, the streets being generally very narrow, we were greatly inconvenienced when riding through them by the number of elephants which we met, to which our horses had a most decided objection. On a soft sandy road an elephant moves along at the rate of five or six miles an hour without making the slightest noise; and as it was a matter of perfect indifference to their mahouts whether foot-passengers or horsemen were run down or not, we occasionally, particularly at night, found ourselves close under the bows of a first-rate of this description, when it was as difficult

to steer clear of him as to stick to our frightened horses afterwards. The principal amusement of the king, his court, and the rich natives, before the annexation, had been, witnessing from a safe position the fights of wild animals; of which, at the time of our arrival, the town was full. Crosse, Moorsom, and I, when out for our usual Sunday afternoon's walk, passed through a deserted Serai; in the middle of which, under a few trees, were three wooden cases, each only just large enough to hold the tiger which was in it. They made a pretty row when they saw us, and we did not stay with them long. A little further on, wishing to ask our way, I looked into the open door of a large house, and was immediately greeted by a loud snort and a stamp close to me. It was quite dark inside, and nothing was visible; but an old native came out quickly, and told us not to go in, as the building was full of fighting antelopes, belonging to the ex-king; and that they were unaccustomed to white faces, which made them mad. In fact, while he was speaking, we could hear the snorts and stamps continually repeated. He was seemingly in a state of great distress; as since the annexation the allowances for keeping up the establishment and feeding the animals had been stopped, and he was afraid that his charges would starve.

One morning when riding into the town I was met by three rhinoceroses, driven along by half-a-dozen horsemen armed with long spears; and in the bazaar, just outside the men's quarters, a very large tiger used to lie all day on a common bedstead. He was a very fine animal, and his coat was much

longer than that of any other that I have ever seen. He seemed perfectly tame, and the bazaar people passed backwards and forwards close to him. His attendant, an old white-bearded native, generally sat by him on the side of the bed and scratched him with a comb.

Before long, however, the elephants, fighting-beasts, &c., disappeared, and their owners went with them. The great crowd of courtiers, eunuchs, native princes, &c., found that, after the annexation, Lucknow was no longer the place for them. Their occupation was gone, and so were their emoluments. Some of them even sold their jewels; and rows of pearls, which may have been very valuable, but were certainly very discoloured, were brought to our messhouse and offered for sale.

The ex-king's armoury also was put up to public auction, which lasted many days. In it were many guns by the best London makers; but the locks of all had been removed. Swords were put up in thousands, and went for small sums. I got a native expert to pick out a good one, which I bought for fourteen rupees; and also a curious long-handled dagger, which he said was a most handy weapon. "You wear it in your waistcloth in front," said he, "and play unconsciously with the handle when in conversation with any one, and in this way you can, in a moment, plunge it into his stomach when he least expects it." I lost both these purchases when our baggage was plundered at the commencement of the mutiny.

In the ex-king's army were several regiments partly officered by Europeans. A card, bearing